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Comments on Adhikari and Mathe by Gellner

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Adhikari and Mathe's paper is a model of engaged intellectual production: it provides a sustained and informed forensic analysis of issues of the highest importance and most immediate relevance. There are two main themes. The first, and less satisfactory, theme concerns the power and irresponsibility of the Western media, particularly CNN and the BBC. The second, and more convincing, theme has to do with the unanswered questions and doubts that remain about the course of events in the Royal Palace on June 1st 2001, events whose impact on the Nepali nation can truly be described by those overworked terms 'traumatic' and 'tragic'.

The Western mass media can certainly be accused of ignorance and of trivialization (one particularly poor article I saw mentioned the 'king as Vishnu' trope about half a dozen times), but to accuse them of overweening power, seems paradoxical. If the Western reporting shows anything, it is the failure of the West to convince non-Western people of its point of view. After all, most Nepalis, as far as one can tell on an impressionistic and anecdotal basis, do not accept the official line that Dipendra was responsible for the killings. It was precisely the failure of authoritarian governments in the USSR and eastern Europe to control the flow of information that was one of the key elements in the collapse of communism in those countries. The Western media has singularly failed to convince most Nepalis of the line that their own official enquiry has taken. Nepalis have come to their own conclusions.

Adhikari and Mathe say, "alternative theories were not considered". If there are coherent alternative theories that fit the available evidence and face fewer unanswered questions, it is for Nepalis to put them forward. So far, the public, both in Nepal and in the wider world, is faced with the choice of believing the official account, which has, as they point out, some holes in it, but is at least afloat. Or, the public can choose to believe rumours or emotional responses that have only narrative plausibility to recommend them, but no evidence. It is a basic rule of epistemology that unless there is an alternative, more encompassing theory, one has no choice but to go with the existing theory, unsatisfactory though it may be. For the moment, the official account is the only one that has independent confirmation from sources within the palace.

The American sociologist, W.I. Thomas, is supposed to have said, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Does it matter if most of the Nepali population believes that the 1st June incident was a coup d'etat? For the older generation and for uneducated rural people, the king is the king, however he acquires the throne. However, education is one area where Nepalese modernisation has been a success story. Nepal's increasingly educated population is likely to take a different view. Monarchies only survive into the modern era if the monarch acts, and is seen to act, within and under the law. Before June 1", parliamentary democracy in Nepal already faced a severe crisis of legitimacy. Whether constitutional monarchy can survive this shock to the symbolic heart of the system, remains to be seen.